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研究ノート

Observations From Junior High English Classes at Hakuoh University Junior High School in Ashikaga

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1. Introduction

Starting this April, I was given the opportunity to begin working as a teaching assistant at Hakuoh University Junior High School in Ashikaga. It is a great opportunity that I am very thankful for, and have come to enjoy thoroughly. Before embarking on this new adventure, I was a bit anxious. Although I have taught in Japan for many years, I had never taught junior high school students. My experience in teaching English had focused on kindergarten and elementary school students, university and adult learners. Therefore, I was a little concerned about delving into the realm of teenagers. I had never taught junior high or high school students, and I was a bit nervous about how the flow of class would go, and how my interaction with students in their teens would proceed.

I was very thankful when I learned that I would be working with

a seasoned veteran of teaching English to this age group, and was even more encouraged when I was told that I would be acting as an assistant in the first year, rather than the main teacher. I have been teamed with Mr. Jeffrey Miller, a fellow American, who has spent a good portion of his life teaching here in Japan, and the last 15 years teaching at various divisions of Hakuoh University. It has been with his excellent leadership, skill in the classroom, ease in communicating with and dealing with students, and perhaps, above all, his willingness to take a mentor role, that I have become comfortable enough to write this paper on some of my observations from our classes together.

The fact that the educational system here in Japan is much different from the one in the U.S. is very well known. Having been involved in the early stages of the Japanese educational system for the majority of my tenure here has given me a clear insight into of what makes today's elementary students succeed. However, I never gave much thought to what comes after children graduate from elementary school and move into the next level of schooling. I saw the children in schools where I was teaching begin learning English at the young age of three, or even two. Depending on the location, they were involved in classes two times a week, weekly, or monthly. Again, depending on location, children would participate in everything from simple finger play and dancing, to memorizing passages, and answering questions based on those passages. There was a wide range of accomplishment of these tasks, depending on the ability and attitude of each child, even though the majority of the children participated in all the activities. With simple English activities beginning from the time that they are in kindergarten, students are able to participate in more difficult and challenging activities upon entering elementary school. This, of course is the theory behind the system in

place today by establishments for young learners. Some are much more successful than others, but it still has become the norm that Japanese children begin some sort of training in a foreign language from pre-school age.

2. My U.S. Experiences Through Elementary School

The fact that most Japanese children are now exposed to at least one foreign language from the time they are five or six, and continue that exposure through high school and into college (for those who attend), led me to reflect on my own experience with foreign language.

I was schooled in a small rural town in the mountains of Colorado. Nature and mountains surrounded us, and the largest part of the economy relied on tourism. Aspen, Snowmass, Vail, Beaver Creek and numerous other world class ski areas were within a two-hour drive. Visitors from all over the globe came into our backyard to ski, shop and sight see. There were visitors from Canada, South America, Nordic countries, other European countries and Asian countries. People of many different races and backgrounds came to our doorstep speaking countless languages. Despite this, in the very American frame of mind, all transactions were carried out in English. There was no effort made on the part of local shop owners to learn another language in order to make our guests feel even a little more comfortable or at home. But rather the old adage, "If you come to America, you need to speak English," was followed.

At the time I was living there, the local population was 85 percent Anglo-Saxon. The remaining 15 percent consisted of approximately 13 percent Hispanic, with the remaining two percent covering all other races. Proprietors of the main businesses in town: hotels, resorts, grocery

stores, gas stations, large shops, were mainly Caucasian. Some small specialty shops or restaurants were owned and run by members of minority races, but the majority of the Hispanic population and the other remaining races were employed as manual labor, building the ever increasing number of resort hotels and houses for an ever growing demand from the rich for second houses and vacation bungalows. It was a clear cut case of the haves and the have nots, with most of the “haves” being Caucasian, and the “have nots” being of all other races.

For this reason, local school populations were made up of a large number of rich white children combined with a not-so-well-off minority group. This was in the days before ESL help became available for those students who did not speak English as their mother tongue, so all classes were conducted only in English. There were no foreign language classes in kindergarten or elementary school. Of course, we had history and Social Studies classes, and even lessons about cultural events from around the world. However, foreign language was never a part of those lessons or classes. Therefore, although people from over half of the countries in the world came to visit our little town, bringing with them their individual cultures and languages, I was never exposed to a language other than English until I reached junior high school. I had friends from Mexico, who spoke Spanish in their houses, but at school or when we played together, it was an unspoken understanding that we conversed and played in English. There were Mexican, Chinese, and Italian restaurants in town, with owners from those different countries, however all communication with customers was carried out in English. With such a variety of cultures coming to visit our town, it was a paradox that the local population was so monocultural.

3. Second Language Acquisition In Colorado

My junior high school offered two language classes when I entered the seventh grade. We had our choice of Spanish or French. The majority of students chose Spanish, as the majority of students either had a Hispanic friend, or were Hispanic themselves. The teachers of these classes were both White Americans. They were chosen to teach these classes because they happened to have the best language skills in the respective language among the current staff. I remember the year I moved up to high school, a new teacher from Texas was hired by the school in hopes that his Spanish ability was better than the teacher who was teaching at that time.

Spanish classes were conducted primarily in English, with the focus being on vocabulary and grammar. We repeated words and grammatical structures, with all instruction and explanation being in English. Because it was a beginner's class, we had written assignments and tests, with very little conversation. Moving into my second year of junior high, listening was incorporated into the classes. A passage from our text was read, and we were asked to repeat. There were also fill in the blank exercises which utilized listening tapes, but again there was little if any focus on conversation. This same format was used in first level high school classes as well. Some listening, with the majority of activities focusing on vocabulary and grammar.

It was not until the second and third level classes that conversation activities were introduced. My second and third level high school classes were taught by a teacher who had actually lived in Mexico. She had studied at university and had lived and worked for several years in Mexico. Because of this, she understood that book learning is not always the best way to go about learning a language. Rather, as humans are

communicative animals, the best way to learn is by using the language. Once class began, she spoke only in Spanish. In these classes, we were assigned skits to perform in front of the class. We were asked to find songs in Spanish whose meaning we wanted to share with the class. Oral tests became more prevalent than written tests. The focus of the class moved from reading, writing and memorizing, to using language to communicate feelings and ideas. Needless to say, these classes were very popular with students, and always filled to capacity. The atmosphere was one of leaving the U.S., and venturing into Mexico for an hour or so. These classes were a great influence on how I approached teaching my kindergarten and other students, and they still influence how I look at the current classes I teach at Hakuoh University Junior High School.

4. How My U.S. Experiences Created a Background to Teaching at Hakuoh University Junior High School

While the Spanish classes in the U.S. which utilized conversation and immersion were classes for second and third year high school students, I am observing and teaching classes for first and second year junior high school students in Ashikaga. As I stated previously, my own experience from first and second year of junior high school was mostly rote learning and memorization. The largest percent of our grades came from vocabulary and grammar tests. This meant that the majority of class was spent listening to the teacher explain vocabulary words, and talk about grammar. Similarly, the majority of our homework was filling out vocabulary and grammar worksheets. Certainly not the most entertaining or motivating ways to learn a language. Because of this my classmates and I rarely had good things to say about class. “Spanish is

so boring!"; "Spanish is so hard!", and "I don't understand Spanish at all!" were phrases which were most commonly used when students described Spanish classes.

Although I did not personally take the offered French classes, the general consensus among the students seemed to be the same for those classes as well. The majority of the people I knew who were taking the classes had the exact same things to say about French as we did about Spanish. They did not want to know how to say "butterfly" in French, and were disappointed about the fact that they had to remember vocabulary simply to get a grade. Of course, similar things were said for algebra and other types of advanced math. "This is so hard, I can't remember it, and besides, when will I ever use this!" was often said. However there was a more concrete example of the usefulness of advanced math in our science classes. Biology and chemistry used some of these math formulas that we were forced to memorize, and so we could see them at work in our everyday lives, to a point.

The fact, however that most all of the communication that took place in our sheltered lives happened in English made it difficult to imagine why we would have to know how to say "butterfly" in French or Spanish. At that age, most students had no aspirations to travel, and the majority of our families did not have the means to make a trip to France or Spain happen. There was no clear cut reason for us to continue the study of something we truly never saw ourselves using.

In contrast, when those of us that stuck with it began taking the second and third year high school classes, there were more opportunities for travel, and in general, a greater global conscienceness emerged. Junior and senior year trips were offered. Some students had spent time in foreign countries. Exchange programs sending students to

private homes and even university preparatory schools in Europe and other countries were becoming available. Because of our approaching graduation, we were given more opportunities to become aware, and indeed were becoming more aware on our own as well, of the world around us and the opportunities to travel and live in those countries. Of course another huge factor was puberty and hormone levels. By high school levels had tapered off considerably compared to junior high school.

As a result, we were more ready to deal with the outside world as third and fourth year high school students (U.S. junior high schools are only grades seven and eight, high schools are grade nine through 12) than we were as first and second year junior high school students. Those reasons, coupled with the increase in conversation and decrease in vocabulary and grammar, made for much better attitudes in those classes. Again, I did not personally attend the French classes, but the general attitude was that it was much more fun to study French in high school than it had been in junior high school. With the potential of travel becoming more real, the realization of how much having skill in a foreign language could not only be beneficial, but it would be pretty cool.

It was something of a high point of motivation for acquiring skill in a foreign language. After graduating high school, I personally made two short trips to Europe, but was never there long enough to improve my Spanish skills. My trips were always so short that I never really felt any urgent need to acquire any skills in other languages either. I travelled to Mexico on occasion, and was pleased with the fact that I could have simple conversations, and ask for things that I needed. However, I felt no desire to, nor did I have plans then to live abroad. I was going to university and therefore had other things to worry about. So, for the short time from my third year in high school until I started

university and realized it would not be so easy to travel anymore, I had grand visions of the possibilities that could be realized if I applied myself to learning Spanish. But for me, at that time, the possibilities went unrealized and I went off to college.

5. My Post-Secondary Experiences

Entering college as a freshman, I chose to major in business. I was hoping to go into Hotel and Resort Management at some point, and thought a BA was a good way to start. I also signed up for a Spanish class, because I had enjoyed the classes from my last two years of high school so much. By my second year however, I found the upcoming Business curriculum too full of advanced math like calculus. I also found that the Spanish classes were too advanced for me. Like my junior high school classes, the teacher was explaining vocabulary and grammar, but this time the class was entirely in Spanish. .

It was at this time, (about the middle of my second year at my first school) that I decided to change majors. I became interested in becoming a teacher. My mother was a teacher, as was her older brother and his wife. With these teachers in direct family history, I decided to go into education. I enrolled in an entry level education class in the spring semester and loved it.

Both my mother and uncle had attended Colorado State University, and both had received their teaching certificates from there. My uncle had actually started his schooling at the smaller college I was attending at the time, and then transferred to Colorado State to receive his degree and license. I decided that this was what I wanted to do, and so undertook the transfer of credits and all other things necessary to change schools.

I was very happy with my choice to transfer, and was able to receive my diploma in three years. I majored in English Literature and received a Bachelor's of Arts Degree. I also took numerous courses in history and some in education to round out my schedule. However, I still wanted to become a teacher, and in order to do this, I was required to go back to school for two years. After just graduating from school, and having taken out a student loan for the last year in order to do so, I was in no financial position to dive back into the two year program required to attain my teaching license.

It was at this time that my father told me about the son of a friend who was teaching English in Korea, and was making quite a good salary at it. He suggested I go overseas, teach for a year or two while saving money and return to school with money saved up and a year or two of real life experience under my belt. This sounded like a very opportunistic chance to me, so I researched and found a school where I could receive ESL/EFL certification at New World Teachers, in San Francisco.

It was an intense course, and included daily lessons to ESL students who came to the school for free lessons. Daily lessons consisted of teaching students in the mornings, sitting through lectures, doing group projects and discussing homework. In the afternoon, each teaching student was put in charge of a class every other day. In the beginning, lesson plans were made for us. However, soon we were required to make our own lessons. Students who were not teaching on that day were required to fill out an observation form, evaluating each teaching student's class performance, stating good and bad aspects of the lesson, as well as giving ideas for improvement.

It was very busy, but it was during my tenure at this school that I interviewed and eventually was chosen to come to Japan. My interview

was with Westgate Corporation. My interview actually took place just after the halfway point of the term, and I was offered a job. I was told that the theories and practices taught at New World Teachers were the same as those used by Westgate. It was with Westgate that I first came to Hakuoh, and began my adventure in Japan.

My own foreign language acquisition experience and attitude, is what I keep in mind as I make these observations of Japanese junior high school students' attitudes and abilities from our class.

As for the first day of class, I was not sure of my role. Principal Horiguchi and Mr. Miller explained that I would be an observer and team teacher. Up to this point in my career, I had yet to work as an ALT in elementary, junior high or high school. I had never been part of a team teaching program at these levels of any capacity. I had been teaching together with Japanese teachers in Japanese kindergartens and day care centers, as part of a part time job, but I knew that my role teaching those younger children, and these teenagers would be different. The only thing I could think to do as far as preparation was to brush up on my methods that I used when teaching the closest students in age to these students, the university students I had taught some 15 years before, in my first job here in Japan. I looked through old notes, practiced old methods in my head, but without anything concrete, such as a class list, or a name list, or even a schedule, I had a hard time preparing myself. I was not really that worried, I just had no idea what to expect, except for it to be different.

6. Starting at Hakuoh University Junior High School

Upon my arrival at school, I was greeted and taken into the part time teacher's room by Jeff Miller. We both received the class schedules

and student lists for the year at that time. They had been made out and were ready, but as we were part time teachers working only once a week, they had not been sent out to us. Again, not a big problem for me, as I was not the one who was going to be doing all the teaching and or planning. Despite only having received these materials that day, Mr. Miller was totally prepared and knew exactly what he wanted to do in class. As he was explaining his lesson plans to me I instantly came to the conclusion that Mr. Miller is a teacher who has taught a wide range of classes, at all levels. As I observed the classes I noticed that he simplified the activities to match the levels of the students yet the theories and reasons he chose each activity, were much more than simple. I could see the years of theory, trial and tribulation, searching and research that had gone into each activity. Each was chosen not just to give the students something to do during class, but rather to help them continue along on the ladder of learning. I could see the steps that needed to be taken to accomplish this task. I could also see how each activity would lead to further English understanding and achievement, if extended and expanded upon. All of these things were presented to me in Mr. Miller's short explanation on that day, and continue to be clarified each week as we continue to do the lessons together.

My first observation was the small size of the class. Anyone with whom I have discussed junior high school has told me that the number of students in their class was quite large. Most were in the twenty-to-thirty student range. These were of course numbers from public junior high schools, as opposed to a private one. Even those few who went to private schools still reported that the classes were in the high teens to twenties. It was with these numbers in mind that I made my way to class on the first day. Both classes, however were quite small. The first

class was a second year class. There were a total of seven students. Five young men, and two young ladies. The room itself was big enough for around thirty, and probably at some point had actually been used for that number. But now, the eight desks were moved all the way forward to the front of the room, directly in front of, and actually in some cases, touching the desk of the teacher. The teacher's is not so much of a desk, as it is a podium, where they can set their lecture materials. The back of the room is spacious, and completely empty. Although I came to find out a bit later that we would often utilize it in our lessons, upon first seeing the open space, I thought it a bit wasted. As I later learned, the seven-student class was a subdivision of the entire class, so the numbers are quite small. These students will continue on Hakuoh University High School, while others may transfer to other high schools.

At the chime, the students rise, greet both Mr. Miller and myself, and then sit to begin the lesson. I notice that attendance is not taken, having been done in the opening administrative period by the home room teacher. However, few students were absent in either this or the seventh grade class. The fact that, for different subjects, the teachers change rooms, and not the students, was very interesting to me. It is the opposite in the U.S., with each teacher having their own classroom, and the students making their way to five or six different classes throughout the day. The fact that these students remain together in the same room all day leads to an opportunity for personal closeness and unity that I never experienced in junior high. This closeness makes teaching to these students different from teaching junior high school students in the U.S. Where in the U.S., the students are entering the teacher's realm, here in Japan, we as teachers are entering the student's realm. It is this familiarity with the classroom and their fellow classmates that gives the

students a sense of security when new teachers enter the room.

It is interesting to note however, that even with this sense of security, many students have trouble speaking in a loud, clear voice when participating in the lesson. All seven students in the second year class are accomplished English readers. While some comprehend better than others, all are able to make their way through assigned reading passages. The difficulty begins with their voices, or lack thereof. The loud and vivacious voices which permeated the room upon our arrival, have, for the most part, become soft and almost part inaudible. When asked a question, or asked to make a sentence on their own, there is always an initial silence. Following the silence, depending on the student, there will be an answer given in an almost inaudible voice, or there will be nothing at all, which then begins the difficult ritual of extracting any kind of answer as a dentist extracts teeth.

This situation is certainly not unique to Ashikaga Hakuoh University Junior High School. It takes place across Japan at all levels. It is quite a bit more pronounced however, in this setting with only seven students. In a larger class, with more brains pondering the same problem, there is the factor of sheer numbers which makes the possibility of someone giving an answer. However, with only seven students, their abilities and also their attitudes come under the microscope.

Because of this, in his lesson plans, Mr. Miller makes a point of giving each student equal opportunities to read, speak and create. For each activity and task, each student is given their turn. Anyone who is unable to come up with answers on their own, is given ample time, support and help in coming up with at least part of an answer. Having two teachers in the room makes it easier to focus on “slower” learners. Again, while some students are able to answer on their own, others have

difficulty from time to time, and are given a form of the answer. In larger classes of kindergarten and elementary school children, I have asked fellow students to help by giving answers. However, in this setting it would be quite difficult, because of the small numbers, it would probably end up being the same one or two students answering every time.

This leads to another factor in these classes, attitude. Of course attitude plays a big part of language acquisition. It is a well-known fact that outgoing people will usually acquire language more quickly simply because of the fact that they practice it more, by speaking out more. In kindergarten there are usually a large number of outgoing children, eager to scream their answers at the top of their lungs. In adult classes, the students have chosen to attend classes on their own, and most of them are actually paying for the classes themselves. However junior high school students have neither the childish brashness of the kindergarten children, nor the motivation that comes from being an adult. In fact, they seem to have just the opposite. For the most part, their body language is saying "Leave me alone adult, I just want to be here with my friends." As well as "Please don't ask me anything, because then I will have to think." These attitudes are certainly not limited to Japanese junior high school students, or the students at Hakuoh University Ashikaga Junior High School, but rather seem to be present in teenagers all over the world. In this case however, the situation is again magnified by the small class size.

Because of this the regimen of reading out loud, repeating and critical thinking elements are best delivered in a fun but stern way. Strict, yet kind. Ordered, yet prone to become a little wild at times. All of these paradigms are accomplished on a weekly basis with our lessons. While the students have fun, they are also forced to think. While they are

given freedom in the subject matter for their answers, they are required to use a certain vocabulary or grammar pattern.

This system of strict mixed with loose boundaries works well for the most part. As is the case for all of us, there are days when some things just don't succeed. However, by and large, the system is working quite well for the second year students. In the first year class however, there seems to be a hidden factor that has influenced the class.

The first year class consists of six students, all female. Of the six, two are studying English for the first time and another two had two or three years in elementary school. The remaining two were sent to a somewhat international school from the time they were in kindergarten. These two students have not only been exposed to English for over six years, but were actually required to use English on a daily basis in elementary school. Of course their level is completely different from the rest of the class. Therefore, from the beginning of the year, we have relied on them to give the first examples, or to provide answers when other students were stuck.

For the first three or four classes, this system was working well. However, at about the fifth week in to the school year, one of the two advanced students started to become increasingly withdrawn and reclusive. She attends class, and is awake and alert during class, yet when called upon, she sometimes will not answer. Where she would speak up in a confident voice at the beginning of the year, she now physically inverts her shoulders, tucks her chin to her chest and says nothing. This was not gradual, but rather came out of nowhere in a week separating class meetings. It is certainly not the first time this sort of change has happened to a teenager in junior high school, and it will not be the last. I do hope though, for her sake, that she will be able to come

out of this situation, and continue to use English with the confidence she had at the beginning of the year.

Starting in June, our task of teaching these thirteen young people was greatly enhanced by the addition of a pair of exchange students from the University of Hawaii. Both were here due to a very opportunistic exchange program in place between their university and Hakuoh University. Both were Education Majors. One of them, Ms. Chelsea Kimura, is an undergraduate student, and at the time of writing this paper was only able to attend one class. However, in that one visit, she was able to capture the imagination of the students, and give thoughtful and helpful advice to most, if not all of the students. Her classroom presence was strong, yet she was very gentle with the students. She will make a very good addition to a school staff, when she begins her teaching career.

The other student, Ms. Julie Ajifu, is a graduate student, who has already received her degree. She was here finishing up her final credits and was studying to meet the final requirements of her fourth semester of graduate school. Both unfortunately left us at the end of July, and Ms. Ajifu has already been hired by a school in Hawaii, and will promptly begin working at her new school upon her return home. It is no wonder that she already has a job, as she also has a very strong presence in the classroom. From her first day, she was quick to search out any student who seemed to be having a problem, and help them any way she could. One of her strongest attributes as a teacher, is that she doesn't just help the student, but she shows the student how to help themselves. This is a skill that all teachers on any level strive to achieve, and the fact that she has accomplished this before she has even begun her teaching career speaks volumes. Like Ms. Kimura, she has a firm yet kind approach, and

the students were quick to respond.

Their effect on the students was instantaneous. While Mr. Miller made fun and interesting lesson plans, and we both did our best to keep the classes interesting and fun, the addition of a third and fourth teacher made the lessons even better. The students asked more questions, and while they were not able to use public speaking volume voices, I noticed that their confidence went up over the last few weeks, after getting used to the larger audience they had in class. I believe that this exchange program is beneficial on many levels. The exchange students themselves obviously benefit from their experience abroad. The students who are in the classes they visit also benefit from their fresh ideas and their helpful guidance. The classroom teachers (myself and Mr. Miller) also benefit from their bright personalities and enthusiastic approach to teaching. All around, it is a great program, and I hope very much that we will have more exchange students visit our class after these two fine young ladies are finished with their time here.

Teaching English is not an easy job. Teaching English to teenagers has proven to be, in just my first few months at it, a quite difficult job. In modern society, with very little motivation to learn, or even make an effort to do anything besides play video games and talk to friends, it is, of course our job as teachers to create the stepping stones for their motivation. Creating these stepping stones seemed to be easier to accomplish with kindergarten children and adults. The kindergarten children's lack of shyness and personal restraint led to loud boisterous classes, with the students laughing and participating with great gusto. The problem with kindergarten children is that they are so young, unless they continue to study and even more, use English on a regular basis (like the two students in the first year class), they will forget what they have

learned.

With adults, the self-motivation is there, so it becomes a problem of retention and time. Most adult students are so busy with work and family, that they do not have enough time to sufficiently practice. Therefore, most adult students have a difficult time improving their abilities. Going to class for an hour, once a week is not enough. You must practice at home and on your own time if you have any hopes of becoming better.

On the other hand, junior high school students are in school. They are still learning, and have the time to dedicate to practicing and studying. Their minds are still young and not filled up yet with worries of jobs, or concerns about family. They go to a safe place every day where they can be with their friends and can learn skills from teachers. They are also old enough to retain most of what they are being told. They remember conversations from previous days, and for the most part, lessons from previous weeks. What I have strived to do in these last few months under Mr. Miller's tutelage, is to glean as much practical classroom knowledge from him as I can. His five years at Hakuoh University Junior High School in Ashikaga have given him an arsenal of weapons and tools to make learning fun for our students. I hope to use as much of that as I can, as I prepare to go out on my own in the near future. Finding that mix of loose boundaries with enough structure will be a challenge, but I am looking forward to not only finding it, but to the search itself.

(Part-time lecturer)